

Genesis 34:1–31 (NRSV)

Now Dinah the daughter of Leah, whom she had borne to Jacob, went out to visit the women of the region. When Shechem son of Hamor the Hivite, prince of the region, saw her, he seized her and lay with her by force. And his soul was drawn to Dinah daughter of Jacob; he loved the girl, and spoke tenderly to her. So Shechem spoke to his father Hamor, saying, “Get me this girl to be my wife.”

Now Jacob heard that Shechem had defiled his daughter Dinah; but his sons were with his cattle in the field, so Jacob held his peace until they came. And Hamor the father of Shechem went out to Jacob to speak with him, just as the sons of Jacob came in from the field. When they heard of it, the men were indignant and very angry, because he had committed an outrage in Israel by lying with Jacob’s daughter, for such a thing ought not to be done.

But Hamor spoke with them, saying, “The heart of my son Shechem longs for your daughter; please give her to him in marriage. Make marriages with us; give your daughters to us, and take our daughters for yourselves. You shall live with us; and the land shall be open to you; live and trade in it, and get property in it.” Shechem also said to her father and to her brothers, “Let me find favor with you, and whatever you say to me I will give. Put the marriage present and gift as high as you like, and I will give whatever you ask me; only give me the girl to be my wife.”

The sons of Jacob answered Shechem and his father Hamor deceitfully, because he had defiled their sister Dinah. They said to them, “We cannot do this thing, to give our sister to one who is uncircumcised, for that would be a disgrace to us. Only on this condition will we consent to you: that you will become as we are and every male among you be circumcised. Then we will give our daughters to you, and we will take your daughters for ourselves, and we will live among you and become one people. But if you will not listen to us and be circumcised, then we will take our daughter and be gone.”

Their words pleased Hamor and Hamor’s son Shechem. And the young man did not delay to do the thing, because he was delighted with Jacob’s daughter. Now he was the most honored of all his family. So Hamor and his son Shechem came to the gate of their city and spoke to the men of their city, saying, “These people are friendly with us; let them live in the land and trade in it, for the land is large enough for them; let us take their daughters in marriage, and let us give them our daughters. Only on this condition will they agree to live among us, to become one people: that every male among us be circumcised as they are circumcised. Will not their livestock, their property, and all their animals be ours? Only let us agree with them, and they will live among us.” And all who went out of the city gate heeded Hamor and his son Shechem; and every male was circumcised, all who went out of the gate of his city.

On the third day, when they were still in pain, two of the sons of Jacob, Simeon and Levi, Dinah’s brothers, took their swords and came against the city unawares, and killed all the males. They killed Hamor and his son Shechem with the sword, and took Dinah out of Shechem’s house, and went away. And the other sons of Jacob came upon the slain, and plundered the city, because their sister had been defiled. They took their flocks and their herds, their donkeys, and whatever was in the city and in the field. All their wealth, all their little ones and their wives, all that was in the houses, they captured and made their prey. Then Jacob said to Simeon and Levi, “You have brought trouble on me by making me odious to the inhabitants of the land, the Canaanites and the Perizzites; my numbers are few, and if they gather themselves against me and attack me, I shall be destroyed, both I and my household.” But they said, “Should our sister be treated like a whore?”

## One Thing Leads to Another

A sermon preached at North Prospect Union UCC, Medford, MA

Date: September 29, 2013 Rev. Dudley C. Rose

Scripture: Genesis 34:1-31

The account of Dinah's rape and of the terrible revenge exacted by her brothers,<sup>1</sup> is one of the most hotly debated stories in all of Biblical interpretation. Where one reader sees a hero, another sees a scoundrel. Nearly every episode in this exquisitely told story is ambiguous enough to give the reader many options. Its message is anything but clear cut.

We are still in Shechem, that city in Canaan where Jacob came peacefully and settled. He must by now have been there for some years, for his younger children are young adults. Jacob and his clan have been living for several years among the Canaanites. One day Dinah goes out to visit the women of the region, and she is raped by Hamor's son Shechem. But even that is murky.

Some readers suggest that Dinah had no business going out to visit the Canaanite women. Moral young women in that time would not go out to neighboring neighborhoods without an escort, they say. Some even add that visiting the Canaanite women at all would have been inappropriate. But other readers note that Jacob's family and the Canaanites are living side by side in peace, and that Jacob seems even to have incorporated the name of the Canaanite God, El, into the name of the God of Israel, so the people may be more intermingled than the story suggests. These readers also point out that it's wrong to blame Dinah for bringing the rape on herself by visiting neighboring women. It sounds like the people in our day who say that a woman who wears alluring clothing is asking to be raped.

Then there's the rapist, Shechem. For some readers Shechem is simply despicable, a man who tries to buy his way out of trouble claiming love for Dinah. Others are more generous and say he was trying to do the right thing. But others will tell you that the whole story is a much earlier version of Romeo and Juliet. Dinah and Shechem are of differing clans. When Dinah visits the Canaanite women, she and Shechem fall in love and want to marry. But the two clans cannot get together and tragedy follows. So, one side says that Shechem raped and kidnapped Dinah. The other says that Dinah elected to be with Shechem because she loved him.

Either way, Dinah's brothers are having none of it. In their minds their sister has been raped, and intermarriage with the Canaanites is out of the question. They pretend to agree to the marriage, however, but require the Canaanites to be circumcised. While the Canaanite men are incapacitated by the agony of the surgery, Dinah's brothers slaughter all the Canaanite men, and take all the women and their belongings for themselves.

Some readers see the brothers' actions as justified. They took revenge for their sister's defilement. Others, a little more restrained, are uncomfortable with the scale of the revenge. Hammurabi famously tried to temper the settling of scores in the ancient world. An eye for an eye—revenge could not exceed the original crime. Dinah's brothers visited more than a fair share of vengeance on the Canaanites, these readers say. Still others, like Jacob, see the brothers'

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<sup>1</sup> Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50*, vol. 2, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1998), 317.

impetuousness in political terms. “You have brought trouble on me by making me odious to the inhabitants of the land...; my numbers are few, and ... I shall be destroyed,” says Jacob.

But readers have also been ambivalent about Jacob, too. Some have read him as a wise peacemaker whose project of living peaceably in the land is now obliterated by his hot headed sons. Others have said that in this story we find Jacob now in ineffectual old age. He’s a shell of himself, they say. Jacob, they say, shows no moral courage and leaves his sons to exclaim, “Should our sister be treated like a whore?”

So, is Dinah an innocent victim, a temptress, or a star-crossed lover? Is Shechem a brutal rapist, who may or may not have repented his crime, or is he, too, a man in love caught between the cultural and religious currents of his time? Are Dinah’s brothers shining knights who rescue their sister and punish her rapist appropriately, are they overzealous hotheads who meet out punishment far in excess of the crime, or, worse, do they slaughter a whole town for the honor of their sister who has simply fallen in love with someone from the other side of the tracks? And is Jacob still the wise and, in his wisdom, now the distressed leader of the chosen people, or is his star, not to mention his courage, fading out of sight?

Well, the simple answer is, yes. Yes, any of these interpretations is possible in the story. If nothing else, the inconclusiveness of the narrative testifies to the genius of the story teller. In these short verses we find a complex tale with possibilities that lead in a plethora of contradictory directions. That is, these short verses brilliantly capture life. There is hardly a story told on the world stage today that doesn’t have such incongruity. Listen to narratives ranging from the Middle East to the halls of congress. Describing the very same events and situations, different storytellers are in profound disagreement not only over the interpretation of events, but also over the very facts of the events themselves. Watching the news is enough to boggle the mind.

But no matter how one tells the stories, no matter how one interprets the motivations of the players, things happen, big things. There story of recent wars is told in a hundred conflicting versions, but what is sure is that in the conflicts of recent years 100,000 Syrian citizens lay dead, and more than that number Afghans and Iraqis. So, too, it is with our ancient story. If the exact plot in this ancient story is confusing in many of its aspects, certain outcomes are clear and enormous. We don’t hear the impact the whole thing had on Dinah, but no matter how one tells the story, it had to be significant. We do know that a whole city full of people was wiped out. And we know that the city of Shechem was but the center of a loosely confederated city-state. So, while Jacob’s sons wiped out Shechem, they stirred a hornets’ nest among the rest of the Canaanites. Jacob was right. He and his clan became odious to the inhabitants of the land, and they had to move out of the land not to return and prosper there for centuries.

The outcomes of the story were gigantic and in many ways sad. And few of the players saw them coming. Indeed, no one saw the full implications of their actions coming. No matter Dinah’s intention in visiting the girls in the Canaanite section of town, she never foresaw the coming slaughter of Shechem and forced flight of her people. Neither did Shechem himself, whether he was a lover or a rapist, nor did Dinah’s brothers when they perpetrated the slaughter. Jacob foresees the outcome, but by then it’s written plainly on the wall.

Hitler gathered crowds of cheering enthusiasts as the decade of the 1930s began, but even those who worried did not foresee the full extent of the extermination that would unfold in such a short while. The industrial age promised prosperity, but who foresaw that its chimneys would threaten to choke the life out of the planet? Our Puritan forbears came to these shores to build a city on a hill, a new Promised Land, but no one, I would venture, foresaw the full and brutal

displacement of native populations that would follow. Great consequences often seem to be upon us before we know it and almost as often too late to change them. It's a story as old as the hills and as modern as today's news cycle.

Why do momentous consequences catch us so unawares? Maybe more important, is there a way out? Can we do a better job in seeing what's coming? Today's story gives us a little help, I think.

It's genuinely hard to see how smaller events will unfold. It's what Edward Lorenz called the butterfly effect. A butterfly flapping its wings on the other side of the globe makes a small disturbance in the air currents. But this disturbance affects something else, and it something else, and on and on, until a few days later a hurricane on this side of the globe arises in part caused by the butterfly. But a lot of steps have happened in between, and many other things besides the butterfly, have contributed to the hurricane.

So, here's the deal. Dinah goes out to visit the Canaanite women. But there's no way that she could have thought, "O dear, I'm going to be raped, my brothers are going to be mad, then they're going to trick the whole city and then murder them, and then we'll all have to flee for our lives." Whatever trouble she thought or didn't think she was inviting, she never could have said beforehand all of what visiting the Canaanite women would lead to. Of course, it's not just Dinah. Shechem, whatever trouble he thought or didn't think he was courting, didn't see the full extent of his actions. The same could be said of Dinah's brothers', although one could argue that they were close enough to the end of the story to see where this was all headed.

So, here's the problem. Since we cannot know the impact of flapping our wings, it is awfully easy for us to excuse ourselves from thinking much about it. But the God of ancient Israel does not accept such excuses. In a later text he will tell the people, "I lay before you blessing and curse, life and death. Choose life." The God of Israel didn't mean that all of a sudden the people had a crystal ball. But he did mean that certain behaviors tended to have bad results.

Miss Whitlock was my first grade teacher. It was just a couple of years after the great Brinks robbery of Boston. Miss Whitlock was a formidable woman in her fifties, with a stern look and a high degree of moral certainty. Miss Whitlock told us cowering students, "Those men who robbed the Brinks truck, you know how they got their start? Stealing pencils in school; that's right, stealing pencils in school. Let that be a lesson to you before you take any more pencils from my desk," she said. My parochial school friends told me their teacher promised even more dire ends if they stole pencils from her, but either way, we learned early on that crime started small, and one crime inevitably led to another, and before long you'd be in the clink, or worse, and then who would care about you?

Well, of course, Miss Whitlock wasn't entirely wrong, was she? One thing does lead to another. It did in ancient Shechem, to be sure. It wasn't necessarily crime leading to crime, but one thing, one judgment, one decision inexorably led to the next. It would be difficult to draw hard and fast morals from our story. Like life, it eludes easy answers. But the story does beg for careful consideration of one's actions. Dinah might have acted differently, though I will not be the first to cast a stone in her direction. At every step of the way after that the players in the story made decisions. Though one led to another, things could have ended differently. Shechem could have curtailed his passion. Jacob could have intervened to prevent his sons from slaughtering the Canaanites. Dinah's brothers could have acted with more self-control. At any number of points a different fluttering of the butterfly wings could have changed the course of the story for the better. One thing led to another, but it didn't have to lead where it did. Amen.